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Placing Soldiers on Farm Colonies

By ELWOOD MEAD

THERE is reason to hope that one of the results of the war will be a carefully thought out, social land-settlement policy. This is something the nation has long needed but never enjoyed. Although there has been administered from Washington the greatest area of fertile land ever controlled under one civil polity there has never been any attempt on the part of the government to plan in advance the development of any particular area so as to create an agriculture that would maintain or increase the fertility of the soil, that would regard the farm as not solely a place to make money, but the means of a healthy, independent existence and the center of family life. There has been no attempt to select colonists so that they would be harmonious or agreeable members of the rural community or effective agents in rural development. There has been no attempt to fix the size of farms so that they would have a definite relation to the ability of the settler to cultivate them properly or to the income needed to give a comfortable support to a family.

The social and economic importance of having land owned by its cultivators and of having such restriction on tenure as would prevent land monopoly was not realized. As a nation we have acted on the idea that anyone who was strong enough and shrewd enough to own the earth was privileged to do so. In our early history, land was sold chiefly to the speculators. Later on it was given away mainly to corporations and to states, and the corporation and the state alike paid little attention to the kind of agriculture or the rural society which an unthinking disposal of these lands to private owners might create. Men who bought lands from railroads and from states did not, as a rule, buy with the idea of becoming farmers or of creating an enduring kind of agriculture. They usually bought to sell again at a profit, and from 1870 until near the close of the nineteenth century we had in this country the unfortunate spectacle of the federal government unable to prevent wholesale frauds under the Homestead and Desert-Land Acts, and the railroad, the state and the private speculator

selling land under conditions of development fixed mainly by the speculative colonization agent.

This review of our past shortsighted carelessness is indulged in primarily to show how great would be the change if in place of this the experience and wisdom of our ablest minds were enlisted in an effort to plan rural development in advance, to think out what an agricultural community needs, what obstacles will confront the man of limited capital who seeks to achieve landed independence, and what can be done to help him overcome them.

Such a planned land-settlement policy should be put in operation at once if the nation meets adequately the situation now upon it. Over a million soldiers were drawn from rural pursuits. An equal number should be returned. The argument for this is that an increase in farm products will meet an urgent national need. Before the war, this country had begun to realize that something should be done to insure a more abundant and cheaper food supply. We were importing butter from Australia, meat from Argentina, sugar from many countries. There was no shortage but there was increasing difficulty on the part of wage-earners in providing their children with an adequate amount of wholesome, nourishing food, the things the citizens of the future should have.

The end of the war finds the cost of food so increased as to be a serious menace to industrial progress and political stability. The milk riots of cities and the declaration of the Food Administration that price control of foods should continue for several years are two of many indications. Every European country feels the pinch of hunger and some are menaced by famine. Not only have the world's available stores of food been exhausted but Europe looks to this country to increase production to meet its people's needs and this is causing the fertility of farm lands to be depleted at a rapid rate by overcropping.

More farms and more attractive and better-organized rural life are therefore among the nation's foremost economic requirements. Only those who have studied the conditions of rural life in this country in recent years fully realize the political and economic value of soldier settlements created under carefully thought out plans. Such settlements will give to some sections of the country an agriculture and a democratic rural life they have thus far lacked. A journey from New York to Atlanta, Ga., through

the Piedmont area, with its succession of abandoned fields and destructive methods of tillage, shows that we are to have a rude awakening unless there is a complete reform in our agricultural practices. One century has done more to impoverish the soil in this region than a thousand years of intensive cultivation on the farms of Europe.

We have slashed away our splendid wealth of forests. We have planted hillsides to cultivated crops with no binding material in their roots, and winter rains have washed off the stored-up fertility of centuries and left them scarred with gullies, with many fields which now grow only weeds and brush. Instead of the land being owned by its cultivators, we have a menacing increase in the area farmed by tenants. Formerly indifferent to land tenure, we are now beginning to realize, as yet vaguely and uncertainly, that if we are to be a real economic democracy we cannot tolerate land monopoly nor allow this nation to become a revolutionary Russia through the growth of non-resident ownership and tenant cultivation of land.

It is a happy coincidence, therefore, that the open, healthful life of the farm is what a large percentage of the returning soldiers will desire. This has been shown by the demand for farms by the soldiers of Australia who have been invalided home, and by the inquiry by soldiers now in the American Army for farms under the land settlement act of California.

Two years ago the legislature of that state created a state land settlement board and authorized the purchase, subdivision and improvement of 10,000 acres of land and its sale in small, ready-made farms to settlers. It was not a war measure but was intended to be a demonstration of what could be done through government aid and direction to create broader opportunities for poor men.

The first lands purchased under this act were settled last June. Fathers of four soldiers in our army applied for farms for their sons. These were granted. Another tract of land will be settled in November. One father writes: "I have three sons fighting in France. They all want to be farmers. Isn't there some way by which I can apply for one farm for myself and another for my oldest boy? The four of us will then work the two farms together." Soldiers have written asking if they could register as

applicants, and, if it had been legally possible to give them preference, not a single farm would go to a civilian. There are tens of thousands of such young men in the American Army.

It means much for the success of the soldiers' settlement proposed that our young men abroad have been living for the past year in countries which are not only examples of the best kind of agriculture, but where the ownership of a farm has back of it tradition and sentiment that thus far rural life in this country has lacked. The farm home of France is the altar of the family life. Love for the soil by the French and Belgian farmer is the main-spring of his love of country. Fresh from these impressions, these young men will be ideal material to build up a new and better rural life in this country, to help end our speculative and migratory development and create communities that will be reservoirs of patriotism and new sources of national strength.

THE NATION AND STATE SHOULD COÖPERATE

Assuming that we will follow the example of the other Allied countries and create opportunities for ex-soldiers to obtain homes in the country, there arises at once the question as to whether the state governments or Congress shall direct the undertaking. Thus far, it has been considered mainly as a national matter, the movement having been inaugurated and national interest therein aroused and maintained chiefly through the influence and efforts of Secretary Lane.

The great extent of this country, the wide variation in the soils, climate and productions, and the different ideas and habits of the people seem to make it desirable that both the national and state governments should take part in the movement. This plan has been adopted in several English-speaking countries.

Another reason for state participation is that it can provide the land and be a responsible partner in this movement with a small appropriation of money. Visits to many states have shown that where it is not possible to secure an appropriation of money to buy land, the owners will turn their property over to the state under a contract which permits of its sale to settlers, the owners of the land to be paid from the settlers' payments. The California Land Settlement Board is offered all the land that it cares to colonize on these terms, and there was not back of these offers

the inspiration of patriotism which attaches to the soldier-settlement movement, nor does the federal government in any way assist in the improvement of the land as it will in the soldier-settlement movement.

In Australia the commonwealth government provides the money for developing and improving farms; the different states provide the land. In Canada both the dominion and the states provide land and money. In Ireland the empire provides the money, but the success of Irish land settlement never would have been complete had it not been for the intimate, patient assistance to settlers furnished by the Agricultural Organization Society.

Legislation in Congress should be of such a character that any state could enjoy whatever assistance the federal government extends, provided that the state itself is willing to assume a proper share of the cost and of responsibility for results.

The greater part of the land to be used in settlement is in private ownership. Here is the field for state action. The state should provide the land, both the price and quality of the land to be approved by the federal authorities. The federal government should, however, prepare the land for settlement.

The largest fields for settlement are the neglected lands of the Eastern and South Atlantic States, the logged-off lands, the swamp lands of the South and West, and the arid lands of the West. Here, development can take place without disturbing existing cultivators. But before this is possible there must be a large expenditure in development. This work should be carried out by the federal government because the United States Reclamation Service is already organized, has behind it a 15-years' record of successful achievement, and has the facts and the expert staff needed to begin work promptly and carry it to successful completion.

The two foundations of the system should be, therefore, that the state provide land, approved by the federal authorities, and the reclamation service should prepare the land for settlement.

CAPITAL A SOLDIER SHOULD HAVE

It will be a serious mistake to give this opportunity to all soldiers. Those who have not had experience ought to go through a course of training to know whether they like farm life and to

determine whether they are fitted to succeed. It is no kindness to the individual to let him undertake something in which failure is probable. Every settler who takes a farm should have some capital. This should be required as a protection against overconfidence and inexperience. There ought to be a part of the expenditure on which the settler does not have to pay interest. There ought to be some reserve on which he can fall back in case of illness or misfortune. Such a rule is necessary to the solvency of the undertaking. If farms were thrown open indiscriminately to settlers without capital, men with no seriousness of purpose and no real interest in agriculture would be willing to take a fling because it costs nothing, and they would be equally willing to abandon the enterprise for some trivial cause. In the interest of the community such men should be excluded. It demoralizes workers to have among them people who lack seriousness of purpose, and it does not look well to have any large percentage of the farms abandoned.

The requirement that a settler should have some capital does not necessarily mean his exclusion from the benefits of this act. If the amount of capital required is only 10 per cent of the total cost of the farm, an equipped farm costing \$5,000 will require only \$500 capital, or, if the settler chooses to begin as a farm worker, he can obtain a home which will be his own, with a comfortable house, at an outlay not to exceed \$2,000, and there his initial capital would only have to be \$200, and this sum of money can be readily earned and saved through the opportunities for employment in farm development which will be afforded.

In the California State Land Settlement, the minimum capital of the settler is \$1,500. That condition has not caused the rejection of a single individual who was a safe risk, and there are young men having farms in that settlement who have accumulated the capital within four years. As the California farms vary in value from about \$6,000 to \$15,000, and the cost of their improvements and equipment will amount to \$5,000 more, the \$1,500 is only about ten per cent of the cost of the completed farm, and this percentage of the total cost is about the minimum capital which should be required on the soldier settlements of this country. If an improved farm costs \$5,000, the settler should have \$500. If it costs \$10,000, his capital should be \$1,000 and if, in both cases, he has three times the sum named, so much the better.

Conversations with men vitally interested in this movement and who desire to see the policy adopted show a wide difference in views regarding the authority which should direct the settlers, look after the development of colonies, and collect the money required to pay for the land and improvements. This difference in view is mainly sectional. In the South the prevailing wish is that the federal government should perform this task. In the North and West, and especially in those states where the agricultural colleges are well equipped and progressive, the state board is advocated. This is a curious reversal of the former attitude of these two sections regarding state's rights. The law should be drawn so as to give the states that desire to assume this responsibility, opportunity to do so but, where the state is reluctant, the federal government should direct the entire development. It is my belief, however, that a competent state board would perform this task better than a competent federal board. It will have, back of its action, state pride in the success of the development, a knowledge of local conditions which will show in the numerous intimate and friendly things which help to keep hope and courage in the heart of the settler when all of his cash capital is spent and the outlay for living expenses, improvements and equipment seems unending. Ultimately this plan of rural development is to be the rule rather than the exception if the rural civilization of this country is to keep pace with that of other nations which have made government aid and direction in land settlement a definite public policy. The state that manages a soldier settlement will gain an experience which will show in its progress in future years.

The function of the federal government is to give to this movement unity and general direction, to provide the money and expert organization for the preparatory period, and to give a broader outlook and such oversight in the later stages as to prevent experiments or extravagance on the part of state boards. But the state should be the directing agent in developing settlements and in collecting payments.

SETTLEMENTS SHOULD BE RESTRICTED TO AREAS LARGE ENOUGH TO GIVE DISTINCT COMMUNITY LIFE

The experience of other countries has been that attempts to finance individual settlers on farms scattered throughout rural

communities have been failures. The overhead expenses of management after settlement are too great. Economy and efficiency require that there be at least one hundred farms in each community. It needs that many to create a real community spirit, to provide for coöperative buying and selling organizations, to establish any definite kind of agriculture, and to create a morale needed to bring the undertaking to a successful end.

The task of improving and paying for a farm is not an easy one even under the generous terms which the government may provide. Industry and self-denial extending over several years are certain to be required. Settlers will be more ready to work hard and live simply if they have neighbors who are doing the same thing, but a single family, placed in a community of well-to-do, easy-going farmers with their farms paid for, will certainly adopt the methods and habits of the neighborhood, and a large percentage will fail. The English commissions reported that no farm community should have less than 2,500 acres. That means twenty-five 100-acre farms, and no garden area should have less than 1,000 acres, which also means homes for one hundred families.

HOMES FOR FARM LABORERS

Every soldier settlement ought to contain whatever the community needs. It ought to have a common meeting place, a social hall, and, if large enough, there ought to be schools to give vocational training in agriculture. The best-planned European settlements provide the store, church, blacksmith shop, carpenter shop, and usually a social hall and recreation common. In other words, they recognize the need for a varied industrial life. The same plan ought to be followed in this country.

Some of the settlers will want to be fruit growers, some poultry raisers, some market gardeners, and some will not want the responsibility of ownership and management of a farm but will want to work for wages. The careful, experienced, skillful farm worker is an essential need of agricultural life. He is just as valuable as the farm owner, and failure to recognize this fact and make an opportunity for him and his family to live as American citizens should live has been the cause of the migration to the cities of many families who would, under proper conditions, rather live in

the country. In some sections of the United States the American farm laborer has almost disappeared. His place has been taken by immigrants from Southern Europe and Asiatic countries, men with low standards of living and indifferent to their status as citizens or to their social position. If these soldier settlements are to be really democratic all this must be changed. Homes must be provided for the wage-workers which will be as attractive and comfortable as those for the families of the landowners, although they may, and doubtless will, cost less. They should be homes where the children can grow up under conditions of independence and self-respect which ought to be a heritage of every American citizen.

The most valuable feature of the California land settlement is the two-acre farm laborer's allotment. This is enough land to give a garden, enable the family to keep a cow, some chickens and pigs, and to have their own fruit. Such homes enable these families to live cheaply because they grow most of the things they eat. The farm worker's home is also a valuable feature of the land-settlement schemes of Denmark, of Germany, and of Australia.

Nothing is more instructive than a study of the qualifications of the men who secured the twenty-one farm laborers' allotments on the first California settlement. There are five carpenters, a shoemaker, and two skilled market gardeners. The others are men who understand farm life and farm work, are sober, industrious, clean-living men. One has a capital of \$4,700 well invested. He could have bought a farm, but he has been working and saving as a farm laborer for more than twenty years and he had no desire to assume the risks and responsibilities of ownership. The farm laborers in this community belong to the coöperative buying and selling associations. They attend and participate in the meetings which consider the things that the community is to do for its common welfare. It is a restoration to our rural life of the old New England town meeting, the thing that, as much as any single influence, gives capacity for self-government. The only capital required of the farm laborer is money enough to meet the initial payment on his land and house. He can pay the rest out of his savings because the amount involved is far less than that required to pay rent in a town.

THE NEED FOR LONG-TIME PAYMENTS AND LOW INTEREST RATES

The chief reason for the rapid growth of tenantry in recent years is that the rising price of land made it impossible for poor men to pay for farms in the time which private owners were willing to give. The money could not be earned out of the soil. This mistake must not be repeated in soldier settlements. The time of payment ought to be long enough to enable the settler to meet his payments without undue anxiety, risk or privation. In this country the usual time for farm payments has been five years and rarely longer than ten years. In Denmark, under state land settlement acts, it is from 50 to 75 years; in Germany, 50 years; in Ireland, 68 years; in Australia, 31 to 36 years; in California, 40 years; and the commission on soldier settlement in England recommends that 60 years be the payment period there.

If the interest rate in America be made 5 per cent and the payments are amortized, a yearly payment of 6 per cent on the cost will pay for the farm in 36 years; 8 per cent a year will pay off the debt in 20 years. The difference between 6 per cent and 8 per cent, in the case of some struggling settler, may mean the difference between being able to keep up with his obligations and falling behind with them, hence the payment period ought to be not less than 20 years, and 36 years would, in some cases, be preferable.

WORKING OUT SETTLEMENT PLANS

The conditions under which settlers are given farms must vary greatly in the several states. The methods of development will also vary in different sections. The plan of operation on the neglected farms of the Atlantic states, on the great unsettled areas of the South Atlantic and Gulf seaboard, and on the arid lands of the West, must be entirely different. Our success is going to depend in large measure on the intelligence which we show in adjusting methods to conditions.

On much of the neglected or abandoned farm areas I have visited, the best plan would be to put the settler on his farm. Say to him that it is going to take two or three years to clear the land, bring the soil into condition to produce crops, and that no payment will be required during that time. On the contrary, that he will be paid for every acre properly cleared, for every rod

of fence built, and for the fertilizing and manuring of the worn-out lands; that he will be helped in the erection of farm buildings, and when the preparatory part is over, the money advanced to pay for these improvements will be added to the cost of the farm, and the settler will then begin paying for an improved property.

In the logged-off land and in areas needing irrigation and drainage an entirely different plan must be followed. Settlers should not be allotted farms on these lands until the irrigation and drainage works have been completed and the arid land leveled for the application of water. These are the tasks of an engineer and not of a farmer. There the intending settler who is waiting for his farm can find employment. He can work for wages while his farm is being made ready for cultivation.

In every settlement there needs to be provision for expert assistance and direction in the building of houses and other improvements, and when the settlers are on the land there will be needed a superintendent who will be the confidential adviser of those directing this movement and a source of encouragement and admonition of the settlers. He will advise them about farming methods to save them from the consequences of inexperience and weakness. The government will have to depend on him for advice as to who should be aided, and those on whom aid will be thrown away because they lack the qualities essential to success. In many ways the superintendent of the settlement is the most important officer connected with this movement. He must understand the locality; he must understand the kind of farming that will succeed there; he must have tact and business judgment; he must have sympathy for those who strive, and firmness with those who undertake to abuse the government's generosity. In every settlement the first three years will be critical, and this is the period where advice, encouragement and direction will not only mean that the management or success and failure will be on the right side, but it will do much in the creation of the kind of agriculture and the kind of rural life that we as a nation need, and which nothing but community organization and the mobilizing of the expert knowledge of the country in constructive action will create.